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(dir.)

Kenya in Motion 2000-2020

Africae

Focus no. 6

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DOI: 10.4000/books.africae.2645

Publisher: Africae

Place of publication: Paris & Nairobi

Year of publication: 2021

Published on OpenEdition Books: 8 June 2021

Series: Africae Studies

Electronic EAN: 9782957305889



<http://books.openedition.org>

Electronic reference

MARCEL, Olivier. *Into a “Global Encounter” from the Art Scene in Nairobi* In: *Kenya in Motion 2000-2020* [online]. Paris & Nairobi: Africae, 2021 (generated 22 juin 2021). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/africae/2645>>. ISBN: 9782957305889. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.africae.2645>.

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Translated by Aoife Cunningham



A private house party in an apartment in Valley Arcade, March 2011
Image: Olivier Marcel.

This photograph shows a house party, that is, a selective and secure type of sociability typical of affluent residential neighbourhoods in Nairobi.¹ Held in the shared house of a Kenyan performance artist just back from her time abroad, this party brought together many significant public figures from the contemporary art scene of the city. One can see, for example, an Italian filmmaker and cultural activist, an Ivorian photographer in residence, an Anglo-Kenyan visual artist, a German intern from the Goethe-Institut as well as many members of Maasai Mbili, a collective of Kenyan artists who are emblematic of the Kenyan slum of Kibera. There is a mutual gravitation

1. This text is derived from my PhD research (Marcel 2014).

to each other here despite their differing career paths. This scene portrays one type of performance that anthropologist Bob White (2011, 6) called a “global encounter”² of which the composition reflects Nairobi’s position in the global contemporary art scene.

Despite the restrictive design of the places where such encounters happen—the green and electrified fences of the apartment complexes being the vivid expression and harsh metonymy of it—the access to the switch of artist camaraderie does not result from the “crystallisation of a hypothetical urban identity.” It reflects rather the “fluidity of social, political, cultural and economic relations; the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between country and city dwellers, the elite and the common people, the formal and the informal” (Fourchard & Goerg 2009, 40, translated). This fluidity makes it a privileged ground for the merging of interests between the figures of the “cosmopolitan” and of the “local” (Hannerz 1990, 237–251). In a game where spatial hierarchies and tactics subtly play out, the “cosmopolitan” seeks to place their legitimacy on the “local”. These “locals,” who succeeded in overcoming the obstacles of a fragmented city, display their repertoire of auto-exoticism in order to obtain the resources needed for their mobility. Such encounters go along with the projects and careers of the artists and constitute for them a social resource. It is in these fringes of Nairobi’s cultural life that, among other things, collectives get formed. Through them, the ideological, aesthetic and curatorial lines of the projects that are emerging in the East African metropolis are stimulated and affirmed. The horizon of accomplishment of Kenyan artists is therefore partly played out in the connections they establish in Nairobi with a population in transit and mostly expatriates. Thus, at the end of the house party at Valley Arcade, new collaborations grew and led to a series of artistic events on memory, archives, “Afrofuturism” or the “ghetto culture,” which were notably hosted by the German cultural centre, acting both as a go-between and a director of this globalisation of art.

Nairobi maximises the opportunities for global encounters such as these because of its position as an East African hub for both tourism and humanitarian action, making the city an interface for North-South relations. Today however, cultural exchanges on one side only are no longer the rule because art centres and artistic communities from Africa’s large cities choose to network. Between 2011 and 2012, Kuona Trust, one of the region’s most active centres for visual arts, showcased the work of 256 artists. The national identity of these artists, as shown in the reports that the institution

2. The notion of “global encounter” “refers to situations in which individuals from radically different traditions or worldviews come into contact and interact with one another based on limited information about one’s another values, resources, and intentions.”

produced for its Western sponsors, showed that half of them came from international exchanges: 27% came from other African countries, 14% from Europe and North America, and 8% from the "South" (Marcel 2013). It is through these circulations that contemporary art practices in the "South" expand and, conversely, that Kenya's participation in the globalised world of contemporary art needs to be considered.

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